

Are digital natives really just digital labourers? Teens turning off social media

May 15, 2016 - 12:15AM

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Kathy Evans

The pressure to be a slave to social media is becoming too much for an increasing number of young people, writes Kathy Evans.

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Sofia Stojic and Sara Cooper (front) who are ambivalent about social media. *Photo: Simon Schluter*

Travelling to university on a train, Sofia Stojic looks like any other student; head bent over her phone, scrolling through her newsfeed. All around her are other teenagers doing the same; twiddling their thumbs as they hashtag, like and emoji their way to their destination.

It's easy to assume that this latest crop of digital natives – those fluent in the language of computers, online video games and social media – are entirely at home in a cyber landscape where major aspects of their lives such as friendships, civic activities and social groups are mediated by technology. Judging by the amount of time they spend on it they must love it, right? But what if they don't?

"I find it really stressful, actually," admits Stojic, 19. "It's not even about using it, it's just the knowledge that it is there in the background. It's very hard these days to switch it off and be with your thoughts." As well as Facebook, Stojic uses messenger apps, such as WhatsApp, Snapchat and Viber, sometimes spending up to three hours a day on the various networks but not always by choice; as the world becomes increasingly digitalised, she, like millions of other students, finds her life orbiting around her phone.



Many teens are starting to feel social media overload.

It's the go-to place when she wants to find out her rostered shifts at the cafe where she works, or join a chat club for her linguistics degree at Monash University; it's the fulcrum where invitations to parties are found, gigs announced, events arranged. And yet it is a demanding beast, always hungry for attention. "When I go to Facebook to get my shifts I get caught up in a newsfeed. I will look for minute but find myself there an hour later."

Stojic is not alone in her growing resentment of a life that's become increasingly digitalised. Student Sara Cooper, 20, is equally frustrated. "I spend a lot of time complaining about it."

She dislikes the way it's altered face-to-face conversations, which she finds are often interrupted by someone suddenly checking their phone, and feels uneasy about her own desire to do so. Many of her friends hate it too.

"It's Pavlovian. There's something about that little inbox sign that satisfies you on the most basic level."

Like Stojic, she relies on social media to keep up with events but hates the intrusiveness of it. "I can be reading a book on the train and the phone interrupts the book. It's distracting." She has tried switching off notifications and even switching off her phone, but like most people her age, has a fear of missing out.

In an era where the ability to digitally network has become a sought-after career skill, Cooper might not like feeling controlled by a set of algorithms and be concerned about those little dopamine squirts that the red notification icon gives her brain, but like millions of others, she needs it.

And yet, according to Dr Peggy Kern from the Centre for Positive Psychology at the University of Melbourne, the question of whether teenagers actually want to be on social media is one we haven't yet explored. "There is almost the assumption that they do, but actually it's a really good question and one we haven't asked enough."

Dr Andy Ruddock, senior lecturer in communication and media studies at Monash University, feels the term digital labourer is a more accurate reflection of a teenager's relationship with social media than digital native, which suggests they are totally at ease in this shifting landscape.

"There's been a tendency to construct a bipolar view of young social media users as either victim or vanguard; they are either being corrupted or created by it. We talk about social media as either something that they've got no problem with, or something that is doing terrible things to them, whereas the reality for a lot of them is that they are making the best of a bad deal," Ruddock says.

As Karl Marx observed, humans make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing. Teenagers never asked for the world they have inherited from Facebook, Google, Twitter and Yahoo, and are beginning to question its ability to transcend anomie and create social solidarity.

"Perhaps they are just exhausted by the intensity of it and that's a problem," Ruddock says.

No wonder. According to Katina Michael, Associate Professor at the School of Information Systems and Technology at the University of Wollongong, many teenagers have more than 40 social media apps.

"It's information overload. The technology savvy people will keep pushing and creating new apps and new social media capacities but individuals are not machines, we are not digital. So I think more people will say goodbye to this kind of environment," Michael says.

Amy Bismire, 19, a nursing and midwifery student at Deakin University, has recently deleted her Instagram account and wishes she could do the same for Facebook.

"You spend so much time looking at other people you forget to look at your own life. On social media everyone shows their best side – how they want to be seen – not how they really are. It's a fake environment."

It's this lack of authenticity that unsettles her. "It doesn't make you feel good. It doesn't make you feel bad either, but it just doesn't make you feel better."

Bismire also feels worn down by the relentless nature of it and the way it seeps into her home life. "It's not like you can ever get away from it. You can switch off your phone but it's still there."

Like Stojic, Bismire relies on Facebook to connect to homework groups, but finds herself distracted by her newsfeed. "It draws you in. You don't want to but you start scrolling; it's a habit that's hard to break."

Why is it so hard to give up? While the jury is out on whether social media is addictive (it is not classified as such by the psychiatric bible *DSM – 5*, experts agree there are similar patterns of tolerance and withdrawal that are associated with gambling. Clearly young people are worried about the thin line between habit and addiction.

Claudia Howlett, 15, closed down her Instagram account two months after opening it. She signed up to Facebook after succumbing to peer pressure but ironically, doesn't feel more connected to them.

"Some of my friends would stay up all night and then be too tired to talk to me in school. Instead of talking to people they could see in person they were too busy chatting to people they'd never met. It put me off. I didn't want to be like that."

She quickly learnt that spending hours on Facebook made her feel quite sick, "as if I'm wasting my life," so she sets herself time limits and refuses to use any other platform: "It has made me the outsider in some ways but the positives outweigh the negatives."

It is a brave choice in a world driven by a primitive need to connect. Ruddock points out that when people started going to the cinema, it wasn't so much about watching a film as being with others. Magazines in the '70s – particularly girls' ones – gave teenagers plenty to talk about in the school yard.

Similarly, soap operas and television programmes have provided a wealth of social capital. But it is the sheer volume and intensity of social media interactions, all requiring some sort of immediate response if one is to remain likeable, that can weigh teenagers down. If psychological health relies on balance, the amplitude brought on by social networking is the thing that concerns them most.



Sofia Stojic and Sara Cooper (in blue) who are both less than excited about the world of social media.
Photo: Simon Schluter

Anxiety will always play a huge role, partly because technology has developed faster than our capacity to process it, but also because fear has long been a by-product of media usage (the parents of today's teenagers were probably told in the '80s that watching too much telly would make them square-eyed.)

Meanwhile Stojic, like Bismire, Cooper and Howlett, may dream of living a life unplugged but knows it is not very feasible.

"It's the way the world is. People like to push the positives – and there are a lot of positives – but they ignore the negative effects," Stojic says.

Kern sees this emerging ambivalence among teenagers as encouraging: "Perhaps technology is coming to a point of balance. Young people are starting to make a stand and change things amongst their peers and that's where it needs to go. They have misgivings and are starting to ask questions. I think that is very promising."

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